

# LIFELONG LEARNING IN CANADA: A FOCUS ON ADULT LEARNERS

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## **Abstract**

Lifelong learning toward building a more skilled and adaptable labour force is a national priority in Canada. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada has recently conducted a variety of research studies analysing national cross-sectional and longitudinal survey data to better understand issues pertaining to lifelong learning with a focus on adult education and training. The objective of this paper is to present the main findings of these studies. Findings have indicated that although almost half of Canadians aged 18-64 participated in some type of education and training in 2008, 41% of Canadians aged 25-64 were completely disengaged from lifelong learning as they did not participate in any learning activities over the past 6 years. More detailed findings from these studies that go on to investigate access and support to education and training, barriers, returns and labour market outcomes for different subsets of the population will be presented with a link to their relevance in Canadian policy development. The paper will conclude with plans for future research and potential opportunities for collaborative research

## **Introduction**

Lifelong learning is a process by which individuals acquire knowledge and skills over the course of their lives to adapt to a changing environment. This process results in both personal and societal benefit. The concept of lifelong learning acknowledges that learning goes well beyond childhood or the classroom to include a range of situations throughout life. As such, lifelong learning is increasingly recognised as an important element in today's knowledge-based economy. It is not restricted to intentional, structured, formal learning in institutions but, goes beyond that to include learning from work or experiences throughout an individual's life. Gaining a better understanding of adult learning is therefore, important in facilitating the promotion of lifelong learning.

## **Types of Adult Learning**

A variety of activities are encompassed in lifelong learning. Learning activities of adults can be categorised into three distinct categories: formal, non-formal, and informal learning. Formal learning includes structured, intentional learning that typically occurs in an educational institution and results in a certification like, for example, postsecondary education. In contrast, non-formal learning is structured with learning objectives but does not lead to certification from an educational institution. Some examples of non-formal learning are courses, workshops, and private lessons. In contrast, informal learning is acquiring knowledge from day to day on the job performance and can be referred to as "learning by doing". Due to its nature, informal learning is very difficult to measure. Research on adult learning often distinguishes between formal learning such as educational programs and non-formal learning including training courses to better understand the unique effects and circumstances surrounding each.

## **Defining Adult Learner**

Different researchers have defined adult learners in different ways. One way to define an adult learner is by using chronological age. This requires an arbitrary age separation of adult learners from non-adult learners. A different way to conceptualise adult learners is to identify them as individuals who have returned to schooling or training after having left full-time schooling and spent time in the labour market.

Although this second definition may include young adults, it associates individuals based on behaviour and experiences by grouping those who have left schooling at some point and returned.

### **Lifelong Learning in Canada**

Lifelong learning toward building a more skilled and adaptable labour force is a national priority in Canada. Structural changes in the labour market are leading to rapidly changing demands for skills. Globalization and advancements in technology, including information and communication technology, have increased international competition for high-valued goods and services and, in turn, are leading to the need for a highly skilled workforce. This has resulted in a trend toward a greater proportion of jobs requiring higher education and training. Therefore, individuals require up-skilling and re-skilling throughout their career to remain resilient in the labour market.

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) is a department of the Government of Canada. HRSDC's mission is to build a stronger and more competitive Canada, to support Canadians in making choices that help them live productive and rewarding lives, and to improve Canadians' quality of life. One of the ways in which this is accomplished is by developing policies that make Canada a society in which all can use their talents, skills and resources to participate in learning, work and their community.

In line with the central element of HRSDC's mission to support Canadians in making choices that help them live productive and rewarding lives, and to improve Canadians' quality of life, understanding a full range of adult learning activities and their subsequent impact on key economic and social outcomes is essential to assisting HRSDC deliver on its mandate. Supporting learning policy and labour market and skills development is an important policy goal for the department.

HRSDC maintains ongoing research efforts to investigate issues pertaining to lifelong learning and has recently conducted a variety of research studies analysing national cross-sectional and longitudinal survey data with a focus on adult learning. Adult learning has been identified as active engagement of citizens in acquiring knowledge, skills and competency as well as maintaining and upgrading skills throughout life.

### **Purpose of the Report**

The objective of this paper is to present the main findings of three recent Canadian studies conducted by HRSDC covering a range of issues pertaining to adult learning. This research employed different cross-sectional and longitudinal data sets collected with various national surveys. As such, each of these surveys will be described with a focus on information captured pertaining to adult learning. Key findings from the research will then be presented on each of the following: participation, unmet needs and wants, disengagement, barriers, financing, pathways, and labour market outcomes of adult learners. The report will conclude with an overview of some of HRSDC's ongoing and planned future research in the area of adult learning.

### **Some Canadian Surveys on Adult Learning**

There are a variety of surveys administered across Canada that assess issues pertaining to adult learning. Some of these include the Access and Support to Education and Training Survey (ASETS) the National Graduate Survey (NGS) and the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID). The following section will briefly describe these surveys with a focus on their content relating to adult learning.

## **Access and Support to Education and Training Survey (ASETS)**

The most recently developed survey with a focus on lifelong learning, ASETS, was developed and administered across Canada in 2008. The ASETS is a cross-sectional survey that brings together three previous education surveys that covered specific population groups including: the Survey of Approaches to Educational Planning (SAEP), which focused on 0 to 18 year olds, the Post-Secondary Education Participation Survey (PEPS), which focused on 18 to 24 year olds, and the Adult Education and Training Survey (AETS), which focused on 25 to 65 year olds. These three surveys examined specific facets of Canadians' educational experiences. Due to their integration into one survey, the ASETS, it is possible to gain a more holistic, lifelong approach to collecting information on participation in and financing of education and training in Canada. This permits measurement of topics pertaining to lifelong learning in a way that was not previously possible in Canada.

The ASETS survey distinguishes between education and training. Education refers to formal learning that leads to some form of credential whereas training refers to non-formal learning or structured job-related learning activities that do not lead to a credential. Researchers are only beginning to exploit the rich information on lifelong learning that was collected in this survey.

## **Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID)**

The Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID) is a longitudinal survey that measures the changes experienced by individuals over time with regards to labour market activity and income. The objective of the survey is to provide information on the economic well-being of Canadians: what economic shifts do individuals and families live through and how does the situation vary with changes in their paid work, family make-up, receipt of government transfers or other factors? The survey is longitudinal and, therefore, the examination of concurrent and often related events is possible.

The focus in the SLID extends from static measures (cross-sectional) to the whole range of transitions, durations, and repeat occurrences (longitudinal) of people's financial and work situations. Since their family situation, education, and demographic background may play a role, the survey collects information on these topics.

In 2002, new questions on adult education and training were added to the SLID in order to address issues relating to adult learning. In this module, the SLID distinguishes between training programs and courses. Training programs consist of a series of courses offered by educational institutions towards a certification whereas training courses refer to courses, seminars, workshops, conferences and forums that are job-related. Information is currently available on education and training from 2002 to 2007.

## **National Graduate Survey (NGS)**

The NGS follows each graduating class with two interviews: two years after graduation (National Graduates Survey) and five years after graduation (Follow-up Survey of Graduates). The survey was designed to examine a number of factors including: the extent to which graduates of postsecondary programs had been successful in obtaining employment since graduation; the relationship between the graduates' programs of study and the employment subsequently obtained; the graduates' job and career satisfaction; the rates of under-employment and unemployment; the type of employment obtained related to career expectations and qualification requirements; and the influence of postsecondary education on occupational achievement. Therefore, the NGS is a valuable source of information on adult learners.

## Canadian Research Findings

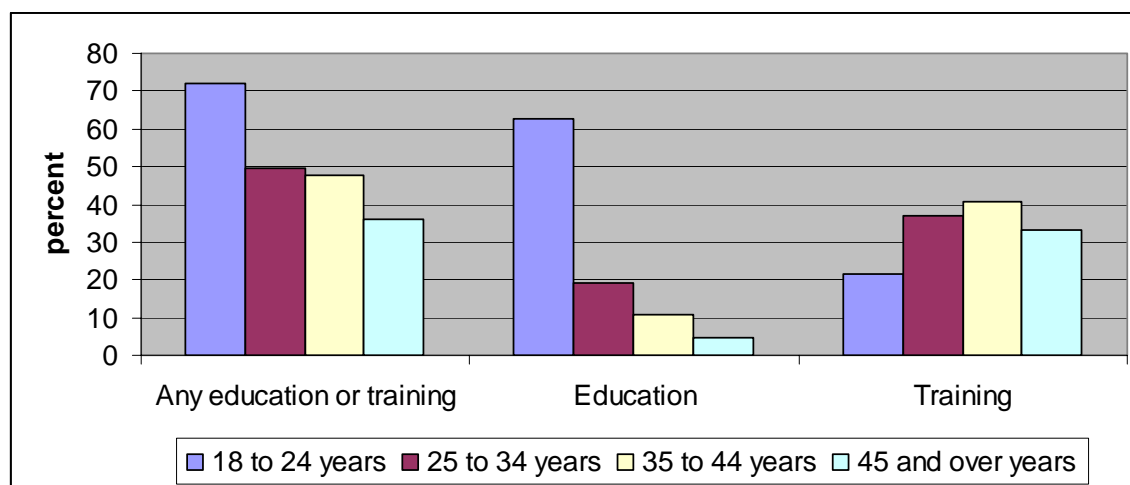
The following section will discuss the findings of three recent Canadian studies conducted by HRSDC covering a range of issues in the area of adult learning including: participation in education and training, unmet needs and wants, disengagement, barriers, financing, pathways, and labour market outcomes of adult learners. A recent report outlining the first results from the ASETS provided findings on participation, unmet needs and wants, barriers, and financing (Knighton et al., 2010). These findings will be discussed first. Highlights from a study focussing on the pathways of adult learners using SLID data will be discussed next (Drewes, 2010). Finally, main findings from a recent Canadian study that examined labour market outcomes of adult learners using data from the NGS will also be presented (Krauth & Mowbry, 2010).

### Participation

Awareness of participation in education and training across the country is important in understanding how to best facilitate lifelong learning nationwide. Recent results have shown that between July 2007 and June 2008, an estimated 10 million Canadians, almost half (47%) of the population aged 18-64 participated in some type of education or training. This included all types of training for personal interest and job and career related training. Almost twice as many Canadians who participated in education and training in this group participated in training activities such as courses, workshops and guided on-the-job training (34%) compared to education programs (18%) (Knighton et al., 2010).

When examining participation by age, it was found that youth aged 18-24 commonly enrolled in University (30%) with a notable proportion (21%) participating in training activities. In contrast, participation in training activities was higher among the adult population while a notable proportion still participated in education. In fact, in 2008, 36% of adults aged 25 to 64 underwent job-related education or training. This represents an increase from 30% in 2002. Furthermore, for the first time, the participation rates in education or training of adults 35 to 44 (42%) was almost equal to those aged 25 to 34 (43%) (Knighton et al., 2010). Figure 1 displays participation rates in any type of education or training, by age group in Canada.

Figure 1. Participation rates in any type of education or training, by age group, 2008.



Source: Knighton et al., 2010.

An examination of the intensity, or time spent on education and training, revealed that in a 12 month period, Canadians spent an average of 50 hours in training. This reflects eight days of training during a twelve month period assuming a six hour training day. Males spent more time in training (57 hours) compared to females (44 hours). Findings further revealed gains in participation rates over time for particular groups. Participation rates almost doubled for those with less than high school education with the highest increase for those aged 35 to 44. Those with less than high school education had the lowest participation rate but the highest intensity of training. Similarly, those who were not employed were the least likely to take job related training but also had the highest intensity of training (Knighton et al., 2010).

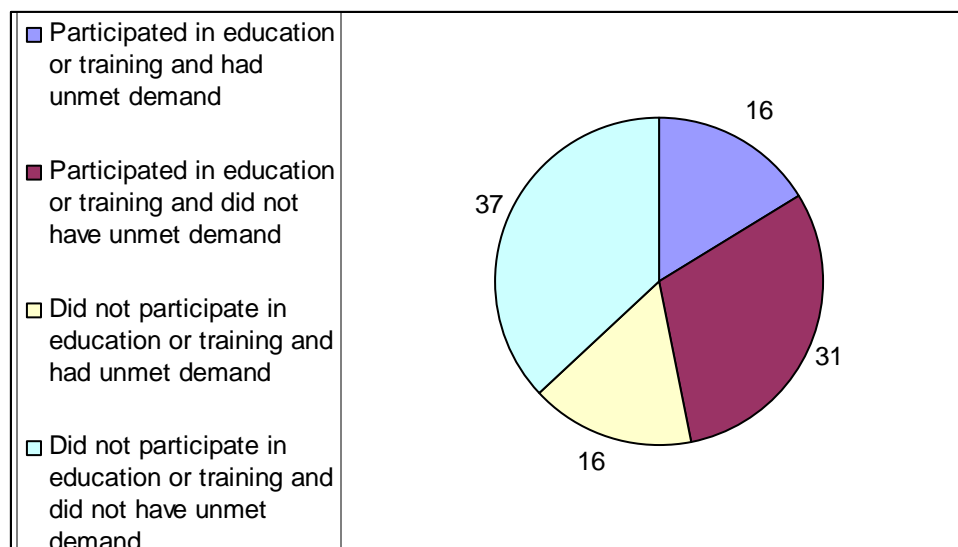
With regard to employer support for education and training, support was common with 40% of employed participants in education programs and the majority (89%) of those in job-related training activities receiving employer support. Furthermore, the proportion of employer sponsored job-related education and training activities taken by employed adult Canadians aged 25 to 64 increased from 88% in 2002 to 91% in 2008 (Knighton et al., 2010).

These results on Canadian participation in education and training reveal that Canadians are participating in a range of education and training activities. They also indicate that employer support for participation may be helping to encourage this participation.

### **Unmet Needs or Wants**

Not everybody who wants or needs education and/or training actually participates in it. To better understand this population in Canada, recent research has examined the issue of unmet training needs or wants. Findings indicated that approximately one third (32%) of Canadians aged 18 to 64 reported that they wanted or needed education or training that they did not take in 2008. Examining participation in education and/or training along with desire and need for education revealed that 31% of Canadians aged 18-64 who participated in some education or training indicated no further needs or wants. In comparison, 15% of those who participated in some education or training reported an unmet need or want. Sixteen percent who did not participate in education or training reported the same need or want. Finally, 38% of this group did not participate in any education or training and had no demands for further education or training. Figure 2 displays the distribution of Canadians by their education and training participation status and their demand for further education or training (Knighton et al., 2010).

Figure 2. Distribution of Canadians by their learning/training participation status and their demand for further education or training, 2008



Source: Knighton et al., 2010.

Unmet demands for education and training were also found to be related to level of education attained. More Canadians with postsecondary education (34%) indicated they had unmet needs or wants compared to those with a high school diploma (26%) and those with less education than a high school diploma (30%) (Knighton et al., 2010).

Age was also related to unmet demands for education and training with the greatest demand reported by those aged 25 to 34 (39%) and 35 to 44 (38%) compared to older Canadians aged 55 to 64 (20%) and younger Canadians aged 18 to 24 (26%) (Knighton et al., 2010).

Education and training are a gateway to employment and personal prosperity. The results on unmet education needs and wants reveal that there is a substantial population in Canada who are not engaged in education or training despite wanting or needing it. There is, therefore, a need to further understand their situation and what is preventing them from participating to better support their needs.

## Disengagement

A substantial proportion of the Canadian population between age 18 and 64 (38%) indicated they had not participated in education or training over a six year period between 2002 and 2008. These individuals can, therefore, be considered disengaged from lifelong learning. Male and female disengagement was similar (38% and 37% respectively). With regards to age, the proportion of those disengaged from education or training increased with age with the highest proportion of those who were disengaged between age 55 to 64 (58%), followed by those aged 25 to 34 (29%) and those aged 18 to 24 (18%). With regards to level of education, more Canadians with less than high school education (67%) were disengaged compared to those who had postsecondary education (30%). These findings identify an important subset of the Canadian population who are not benefiting from education and training over a prolonged period of six years (Knighton et al., 2010).

Recent results revealed a number of Canadians were completely disengaged from education and training over a period of six years. Better understanding the circumstances or barriers around not participating in education and training would be helpful to work toward facilitating informing policies to help alleviate these barriers.



## **Barriers**

It is important to understand the barriers to education and training in order to identify why individuals are not pursuing further education or training despite reporting that they want or need it. Findings indicated that 68% of Canadians aged 18 to 64 reported at least one reason why they did not take further education or training. Interestingly, financial reasons were not indicated as the most prevalent reason. Non-financial reasons including family responsibilities (27%), need to work (26%) and work schedule (25%), were the most common reasons reported by Canadians for not pursuing further education or training. Cost was indicated as a barrier by 21% of Canadians. Not surprisingly, nearly twice as many adults (28%) indicated family responsibilities as a barrier to further education or training compared to youth (17%). Cost was more of a barrier for youth (30%) than adults (20%) (Knighton et al., 2010).

Results on barriers to education and training reveal the importance of non-financial barriers to education and training. These findings highlight the importance of policies to help alleviate non-financial barriers along with financial barriers to education and training. Getting a better picture of financing of education and training, another potential barrier to learning in Canada, is also beneficial towards this goal.

## **Financing**

Canadians are faced with different costs when participating in education or training depending on the type of learning activity pursued and the personal circumstances of the individual. Therefore, research has examined issues surrounding the financing of education and training. Findings have indicated that the sources of financing of postsecondary education changed between 2002 and 2008 with a higher proportion of students aged 18 to 24 years using grants, bursaries and scholarships and a lower proportion of students receiving financial assistance from family and from government and non-government student loans. In comparison to youth, adults aged 25 to 64 were more likely to use non-government student loans (Knighton et al., 2010).

These results help identify the sources of funding used by Canadians for education and training. Further investigation of whether these sources are meeting the needs of the Canadians would be useful.

## **Pathways of Adult Learners**

Research in Canada has also focussed on the learning patterns and pathways of adults. Recently a study was conducted on the adult learning patterns of Canadians using data from the SLID from 2002 to 2007 (Drewes, 2010). This research investigated the extent of employer support for education and training and the impacts of adult learning on wage growth and unemployment experiences. The incidence, types and quantity of adult education and training were examined. Results indicated that more than half of the population had been involved in learning activities at some point between 2002 and 2007 with almost 45% taking training courses (including work-related seminars, workshops, conferences, forums), whereas less than 9% had participated in educational programs (including courses offered by institutions towards a degree, diploma or certificate) and possibly training courses as well. Of those taking training courses, 43% reported they took only one course over the six years whereas 25% reported they took only two courses over the time period. For those who participated in educational programs, colleges and universities were the most attended types of institutions and the mean number of hours spent on learning was 278 hours at colleges and 303 hours at universities. Training lasted a mean length of 89 hours. Participants of educational programs tended to be young without completed certificates at the beginning of the six year period. Findings further indicated that women were more likely to take educational programs but less likely to participate in job-related courses compared to men. Although overall, older workers did not participate in educational programs, they took training courses later into their working lives. Findings further indicated that employers also supported the participation of employees in training courses over educational programs (Drewes, 2010).

Results of multivariate analyses of the incidence of adult learning suggested that educational programs were pursued by individuals who desired improving their labour market success. In comparison, findings suggested training courses were taken by those who had already achieved labour market success. Educational programs had no effect on wage growth for men unless they received a certification. For women, however, wage growth was associated with participation in educational programs regardless of whether or not they received certification. Training courses were associated with higher wage for both men and women but more so for women (Drewes, 2010).

Survival analysis was conducted to explore the effect of adult education on the probability of exiting an unemployment spell. Results indicated that for any month of an unemployment spell, participation in an educational program prior to becoming unemployed increased the probability of ending the spell by 21% and training programs increased the probability by 3% (Drewes, 2010).

These findings add to our knowledge of the pathways to and from education and training for adult learners in Canada. They highlight the importance of education and training in re-entering the work force after an unemployment spell.

### **Labour Market Outcomes of Adult Learners**

Recent research in Canada has been conducted on better understanding the composition and labour market outcomes of adult learners earning college and university credentials. This research used the NGS to look at the 1995, 2000 and 2005 cohorts of graduates that were followed up two and five years after graduation (Krauth & Mowbry, 2010). In this research, adult learners were defined as between the ages of 24 and 55 and out of formal schooling for at least 3 years at the time of enrolment in the program completed in the NGS reference year. This research examined the following: the characteristics of adult graduates, how they financed their studies, did they study full or part time and how did this affect the duration of their studies, the employment status of adult graduates two and five years after graduation, and the returns to post-secondary education two and five years after graduation.

Findings indicated that the number of adult learners grew by 19% between 1995 and 2005 with women representing the majority of adult learners at 64% in 1995. This, however, declined to 60% in 2005. Almost half of adult learners had no prior post-secondary credential (Krauth & Mowbry, 2010).

Age and financing were also considered. With regards to age, the majority of adult learners were under 35 years old when they began their program with some prior post-secondary experience. They also had higher rates of employment than the comparable age group in the population even when education level was accounted for. An examination of the financing of adult learners revealed they were more likely to indicate their primary source of funding as: their savings, employer, employment insurance or workers compensation when compared to other students (Krauth & Mowbry, 2010).

Results indicated more adult learners are choosing to study full-time. The full-time study rate of adult learners increased from 52% in 1995 to 56% in 2005. The length of the program was increased by approximately 48% for those studying part-time when field of study and program level were accounted for. The primary reason indicated for studying part-time was job and child-care obligations. A regression analysis revealed that higher tuition was related to increased full-time study although it remained unclear from the data how much of this was due to substitution into full-time from part-time study as opposed to not enrolling in post-secondary education at all due to issues of cost (Krauth & Mowbry, 2010).

Results further indicated that labour force participation increased for adult learners. Almost 90% of graduates were employed at both two and five year follow ups after graduation. For men, labour force participation was similar before and after graduation. In contrast, changes in labour force participation



were greatest for women. Results of a regression analysis revealed that differences in employment outcomes were robust in accounting for differences in composition of cohorts (Krauth & Mowbry, 2010).

Gender differences were also found in returns for adult learners. For men, earnings increased an average of 10.9% per year in school relative to earnings prior to enrolment with a further increase of about 7% after 5 years. Earnings gains were highest for those who had a prior post-secondary credential. The earnings growth for women was slower with an increase of 11.5% two years after graduation and a further increase of about 2.5% five years after graduation. Returns were highest for both men and women studying business, sciences and engineering and health (Krauth & Mowbry, 2010).

These results highlight the gains from adult education and training. They indicate labour market outcomes included increased labour force participation for adult learners. These findings support the promotion of adult learning from a labour market gains perspective.

### **Future Research**

The research findings described above help us to better understand the situations and circumstances around adult learning in Canada. They provide insight into where to further investigate with future research and identify areas that could potentially be addressed to facilitate lifelong learning in Canada.

There are a number of research initiatives on adult learning planned and underway at HRSDC. A number of these research projects focus on exploiting the information available from the recent ASETS survey. Some of the initiatives focus on identifying the barriers to education and training facing adults, how pathways of adult learning and education relate to individual labour market pathways, returns to education and work experience, financing of adult education and training, and employer support to education and training. This research will build on recent research findings including those described in this paper.

There is also an ongoing interest in further exploring and understanding adult participation in education and training with international comparisons, benchmarking and identification of best practices. This research would allow for a better and current idea of adult learning in Canada from an international perspective.

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